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ABSTRACT

In an effort to broaden the context for classroom writing by providing an audience other than the teacher and classmates, a study used microcomputers, a modem and an electronic mail service to set up communications with classes in other communities. Two classes (27 students) at Sewickley Academy in Pennsylvania communicated for a semester with two classes from Wilsall, Montana (19 students) and one class (23 students) from Kyle, South Dakota. Students wrote in a variety of forms--notes, letters, stories, interviews, drafts, transcripts, and summaries--writing informally and formally and adjusting to the particular rhetorical situation by determining what the reader needed to know, what tone to adopt, and what form to write in. The three schools were extremely different from each other: Kyle is located on a Sioux reservation, Wilsall is very small school in the Rocky Mountains, and Sewickley Academy is a private school in an affluent suburb of Pittsburgh. The students began their course investigating their preconceptions of the other communities, writing about and expressing their stereotypes freely in class. At the completion of the course the majority of the Sewickley students agreed that they were more aware of cultural differences in the United States and had learned to question stereotypes, suggesting that the range of discourse was important not only in teaching students to be agile writers but also in providing a situation where students write to find out about different people and other communities. (NH)

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USING AN ELECTRONIC NETWORK TO CREATE A REAL CONTEXT
FOR HIGH SCHOOL WRITING

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CS 211063

Using an Electronic Network to Create a Real Context
for High School Writing

Narrative Report for NCTE Teacher-Researcher Project

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I began this project observing what happens when high school students exchange writing on an electronic network. Using microcomputers, a modem and an electronic mail service, two of my classes (27 students) communicated with two classes from Wilsall, Montana (19 students) and one class (23 students) from Kyle, South Dakota. In order to capture the context, I used a variety of methods. Students completed a survey before the course began, mid-way through the semester, and on the last day. Three students were chosen as case subjects and were interviewed three times--once by me and twice by my research assistants in the first month of the project and on the last day of the course. In addition, I taped certain classes and transcribed those tapes to keep an oral record of students' changing perceptions. In writing, I kept a journal, collected all of the electronic mail between the three teachers at the three different sites, and saved all of my students' electronic exchanges and hand-written analyses during the project.

The Writing Context

What I found, essentially, is how using the electronic network was able to broaden the context for classroom writing. In an ordinary classroom, it is very difficult to create a context with a reader who is not the teacher or fellow classmate. When students write to interested readers who do not share their everyday experiences, though, they write in different ways. They have to elaborate more on information that would be familiar to them or to their teacher. They have to anticipate what the reader knows and try to provide, in tone and in information,

what the reader needs in order to understand a message. A real purpose is built into this context, too, as students begin to write in order to learn about others, to inform their readers about themselves, to entertain, persuade, or simply make personal connections with people they begin to know and care about. The context is different from the regular classroom in two other important ways too. For one, the exchange of writing is sustained over a period of time. There is an ongoing, interactive exchange of writing and response. For another, the writing is done less for the purpose of evaluation and more for genuine communication. The teacher is no longer the only reader.

In our exchanges, students wrote in a variety of situations that would not have been possible in a conventional class. The audience varied from one reader (to individuals out west, to me, to editors of USA Today, or to college admissions officers), to one class (in Wilsall, Kyle or Sewickley), to all three classes, and finally to a general, unknown audience (as when my students' oral histories were collected at the end of the semester and shared with several local museums, historical societies, and libraries). Sometimes there were multiple audiences, and students had to think in terms of their primary and secondary readers. They also wrote in a variety of forms: notes, letters, stories, interviews, drafts, transcripts, summaries, revised essays, plans, questions, oral histories. They wrote by hand and sitting at a computer screen; they wrote individually most of the time, but in small groups when the situation required more input.

Because they wrote informally and formally throughout the course, they had to adjust to the particular rhetorical situation by determining what their reader needed to know, what tone to adopt, what form to write in, how much to revise, etc. Some topics were provided (an interview with a classmate, the story of an experience that reveals your character, an essay on something unique about your community that would interest readers out west); others grew out of the students' letter-writing

exchanges and class discussion (music, religion, sports, geography, careers, language, drug abuse, unemployment, school, family, jobs, travels, romance). Some writing demanded revision; some demanded input from their distant readers in order to know what (in terms of content or tone) to revise. Students learned to anticipate how they projected their own voice or image in their writing, depending on the form, the topic, the reader.

Breaking Stereotypes and Creating a Community

The three schools were extremely different from each other. Kyle is located on a Sioux reservation in one of the poorest counties in the US. The school drop-out rate is very high and unemployment is 85%. Wilsall is a school of only 40 students in the Rocky Mountains of Montana. The nearest "big" city, Bozeman, is an hour away. The primary occupation is ranching. Sewickley Academy is a small private school in an affluent suburb of Pittsburgh. While the nearby town of Ambridge suffers from the fading steel industry, generally Sewickley is remote from the problems of the city, but close enough to enjoy advantages, like concerts, sports, museums, shopping.

Students began the course investigating their preconceptions of the other two communities and trying to anticipate how others would perceive them. They wrote about their stereotypes and expressed them freely in class. As one student put it,

When we first heard we were going to write to these students, we pictured them as uninformed "hillbillies" that went to rodeos. This was the stereotype we had of them, and we could imagine them thinking that we wear pink and green pants, and are snobs. We were shocked when our teacher told us they had computers. We wondered if they could possibly also have televisions or telephones. This is how it began, one stereotype writing to another. Hicks writing to snobs.

By the end of the course, students' images had changed. Here are excerpts from their final analyses:

... My attitude toward both groups has really changed, no more overalls or paleface, but people with a different culture than mine. I don't think so much in terms of how many mistakes are in their paper, but what's the paper about....

*

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... Having these stereotypes of mine crumble to the ground has really caused me to have an open mind about strangers. I will definitely be very cautious in the future with judging people prematurely, and with forming (and believing in) stereotypes....

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... Before this project I was basically naive towards other communities and their activities, I was mostly concerned with my immediate lifestyle. As far as history, I like it, but what more can you do than read the history book and discuss it? Researching and communicating with both Wilsall and Kyle created an interest in their history for me as well as made me concerned with other communities and lifestyles besides my own. Rather than being concerned about what I will be doing after school or how I am ever going to get my homework done, I have learned to investigate the poverty, unemployment, and alcoholism on Indian reservations. But I have also learned to investigate foreign and domestic problems, as well as develop an interest in foreign political affairs. That is, it made me look outside of my own lifestyle and see some of the world's real problems and pleasures. The whole point is that there are so many things going on in the world that one would be ignorant if they led a routine isolated life without a concern or even thinking about other people and environments besides their own. For me, that was the most important experience of our project.

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... All these [first impressions in the course] were general views that I had about the situation and the people on that part of the country. This, however, did not allow me to really understand them as "real people"; people who feel, who struggle, and who actually are faced with the problems I read about in the newspapers. The method of using computer communication systems to actually be in touch with different people in a different part of the country, allowed a certain unity between them and me. By writing to them it was easier to get to know them, both in terms of their culture and way of life.

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... This course was designed to help students improve their writing. But I feel that I have learned something valuable to me along with improving my writing. One can study about a place, battle, or people, but one never truly knows and understands a people until he has corresponded with those people. In this class we have corresponded with people that many of us know nothing about. We may speak the same language, but we are very different.

After the course, 96% of my classes agreed that they were more aware of what it was like to live in Wilsall, MT and Kyle, SD. 92% agreed they were "more aware of cultural differences in the US," while 84% agreed "I have learned more to question my stereotypes." 85% agreed that they had learned "to appreciate more about my own culture." While the range of discourse was important for teaching students to be

agile writers, the reason they wrote was to find out about these different people and to broaden their understanding of the three communities.

Use of the Computer

A question many people have asked me at conferences kept haunting me throughout the project. Why computers? Why not just regular mail? Two years ago when I did a similar project, I have to admit, that while the computers motivated student writers, they weren't essential to the exchange. This year, however, I was able to document the speed and frequency of the electronic mail to prove its value. During our collaboration, the three teachers used the network as an electronic conference, sending messages more than once a day and almost always within 24 hours. Some were received as quickly as five minutes later. Student writing was so prolific that at times we had to supplement electronic mail with disks of student writing and hand written letters. On electronic mail alone, students mailed more than 560 messages (from a paragraph to about 10 pages). It would not have been productive to send disks through conventional mail and have to wait a week for a reply. Like a word processor, telecommunications is a tool that can facilitate learning when it is used thoughtfully.

Collaboration with Others

Finally, I need to thank the two teachers who helped me manage this project. Joanne Tulonen in Willsall and Bill Noll in Kyle were tireless collaborators. In addition, I want to thank my two student research assistants, Lindsay de Haven and Becky Downs, who helped me at every step of the project, from typing results, to conducting interviews, transcribing, revising surveys, xeroxing student writing, and analyzing the results. They, too, deserve to be recognized as equal participants in this project.